COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

Power Desk packs potent punch

Power Desk — a $104 personal computer program from Software Studios Inc., Annandale, Va. — was released just four months ago, but already it's creating quite a stir.

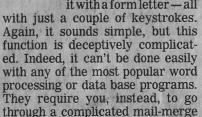Although Power Desk still has the expected few rough edges, it is an amazingly capable program that integrates many business functions into one package. It includes a word processing module with automatic spell-checking; a simple data base module with predefined name, address and note fields; the ability to mail-merge records from the data base with letters in the word processing module; an automatic dialer so you don't have to dial the telephone numbers of people in the data base; a calendar, to-do list and reminder file; an automatic alarm to remind you about appointments, etc.; and even a simple on-line calculator. That's a remarkable amount of value for only $104.

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But despite these numerous functions — all of which are duplicated to some extent by other programs on the market — Power Desk has two features that are truly outstanding:

■ Duplicate record checking. Power Desk uses a complicated algorithm to alert the user to records that have similar addresses. This may sound simple, but it's not; and it's an exceptionally useful function in numerous business situations.

■ Single-letter mail-merge. The program lets you enter a new name in your data base and immediately merge it with a form letter — all with just a couple of keystrokes. Again, it sounds simple, but this function is deceptively complicated. Indeed, it can't be done easily with any of the most popular word processing or data base programs. They require you, instead, to go through a complicated mail-merge procedure that's the same for one name as it is for a whole file or group of names.

On the down side, Power Desk currently has two drawbacks, both of which will be remedied in the coming months:

■ No user-defined fields. You have to use the data base much the way it comes, with specific fields previously designed. It's designed well enough that most businesses can fit into the structure, but it's still backwards — the program should adapt to business needs, not the other way around. A new version is said to be in the works to allow user-designed fields.

■ Not memory-resident. Other competitive programs, such as Lotus Agenda, are memory-resident, allowing you to flip back and forth between programs. True, Lotus Agenda does not have many of Power Desk's features, but some people will forgo some of the advanced features for greater convenience. Again, we're told that future versions will give the user the choice of whether to run Power Desk as it is or as memory-resident with other programs.

Another current drawback is that the program often "hung-up" when I used it in conjunction with a Microsoft mouse and other memory-resident programs. Perhaps future versions will correct this problem as well. In the meantime, I was able to avoid the hang-ups by running Power Desk alone.

The bottom line: Duplicate record checking and single-letter mail-merge really make Power Desk stand out. If you need these features now and are willing to accept some of the rough edges of a new program, don't hesitate to buy it now. On the other hand, if your needs are not urgent and you can afford to wait, you'll be rewarded later when enhanced, follow-up versions are released.

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